Marissa LaGassey

Spring 2017

EDU 402

Educational Philosophy

My educational philosophy has been shaped not only by my time at UMF, but largely by my own experiences as a secondary student and young adolescent. The teachers I have encountered have served to inform who I will be as a teacher, and who I will not be. I am someone who cares deeply for the individual needs of my students and brings excitement and meaning to the math that I teach. As a student, the passion of my teachers greatly impacted my interest in the material and I know that I will work hard to be a lively, enthusiastic, and engaging educator. I also believe strongly in educating the whole person and acknowledging that our students have nonacademic needs that are equally important to their wellbeing. By designing my classroom and curriculum around these ideals I believe that all students will be capable of success, both personally and academically.

While math is my primary content area I am also interested in environmental science, chemistry, social justice, and the arts. In my student-centered and exploratory classroom, I know that these other topics will find their way into the math curriculum and I look forward to making these connections with my students. Unlike most schools, life isn’t fragmented into four discrete topics, by teaching my students using an integrated curriculum they will see the strong connections between math and the ‘real’ world. I like the idea that teachers should be ‘generalists first and specialists second’. It’s important that all teachers are knowledgeable about a variety of subjects and aware of varied viewpoints. No matter the subject, other content areas will inevitably seep in own and it’s important that teachers can feel confident and be competent when this happens. A master of none is often better than a master of one because they have flexibility and can adapt to different scenarios. It is crucial that we can model this for our students and show them how much we value knowledge of all types. As a pragmatist and a humanist I want my students to discover and create their learning while also understanding who they are as learners. I see my role as an educator as a coach and an advocate for my students rather than a director of all goings on. By giving students leadership and team rolls, a say in classroom practices, and a sense of community they will feel a sense of ownership in the classroom giving them a greater incentive to achieve at high levels. When students work together they forge lasting social bonds and feel accountable, not only to themselves but also to their peers. Students conversing and learning from each other encourages greater understanding of the material and often leads to unique ways of thinking that might not come about through lecture.

I am excited to see that proficiency based education is coming to Maine because I think it supports and more accurately measures the type of learning I want to take place in my classroom. It’s important that students show competency before they graduate but it’s important that they be able to show that competency in a way that works for them. There are certain skills we need students to have but who are we to say how they have demonstrate that skill. PBE supports the fundamental ideas of multiple intelligences, understanding by design, and backwards design for instruction. It’s relatively easy to decide what we want students to know, the significant part is deciding how we are going to enable them to get there. We need to remember that different students will take different routes at varying paces to reach the destination of proficient. PBE recognizes students as individuals and allows teachers to design content that is flexible but rigorous. I am excited to see a shift in grading from apparently arbitrary numbers to a four-point scale of proficiency that documents student growth and tells the story of an individual’s learning. Parents and administrators might need convincing that more than four years of high school is a good thing but I would rather see students who are ready to leave high school that rush them out because of what essentially comes down to tradition. If we believe that all learners are unique and require different amounts of time and assistance it follows that students will not all graduate at the same pace.

I hope that with the move to PBE comes the move away from standardized testing as a way of determining funding and futures. Standardized testing stands in the face of PBE in that it supports the idea that everyone’s learning can be measured using one tool. PBE tells us that students can show their learning in a variety of ways while testing values a single type of intelligence. Testing and PBE cannot work together in harmony because they represent two diametrically opposed ways of thinking. Like many things, education works in cycles, and we are at a point where people are moving away from a left brain dominant world into a world that values individuality and creativity – the right brain. Ingenuity and eccentricity are not things that can be measured by a test but they are increasing in value as the job market adapts to the high tech and globalized economy. With so many low skill and analytical jobs being automated and outsourced we need people who can do the human things machines can’t, such as make connections and think critically and uniquely. By incorporating reading, writing and art in my lessons I hope to instill a strong foundation of creativity and thoughtfulness in my students. I want my students to learn how to think like there is no box and not be told their worth by a test designed to exclude those of low socioeconomic status and people of color, among others.

Although I’m sure there will be times when I will use tests or quizzes to measure learning I hope that they will be infrequent and ask questions that require higher order thinking than choosing from four options or filling in a blank. Testing can be an efficient way to collect data and assess competency but it often fails to illuminate the learning that has taken place. As a student, I have seen people who know their stuff test poorly while others who have learned relatively little test well. My tools for assessment will promote more learning rather than measure existing knowledge. I want students to work hard on something and end up with a product that they are proud to own. Tests tend to give the impression that the learning is over while projects allow students to delve deeper into a topic and uncover new information. Projects can encompass a variety of subgenres and allow students to explore what interests them rather than evaluate students on what I see as important. By giving students choice and freedom they will feel invested in the work and thus retain the information far longer than facts on a test. Having students create a product allows me to see inside their thinking and get a complete picture of where they are, what misconceptions they still have, and what motivates them. When students explore and create they integrate other subject areas seamlessly, exploring the application and context of content in the real world and then presenting that information through writing, speaking, technology, or art.

Because of my desire to teach more than *just* math I hope that I can be a part of a team that collaborates and integrates in a way that is natural and meaningful. This type of teaming often lends itself to the middle grades which is one of my biggest motivators for teaching this age group. In addition to the middle school design and mindset I also love the developmental stages of the middle grades. Middle school students are often less apathetic than high school students and are not yet as solidified in their feelings about school. I think that middle schoolers are highly impressionable and are in need of adults who can empathize and provide support for the turbulent times they are facing. I hope that I can be a positive role model for my students academically and in terms of developing a growth mindset. I want to show my students that they can gain access to a vast array of opportunities through hard work, determination, and a positive outlook. Although I can see myself teaching any grade level, my experience has been limited to the middle level classroom so I hope student teaching will give me a clearer picture as to my preferred grade level.

Math is a subject that often isolates students and foments fear and anxiety. My experiences with math as an elementary and secondary student varied greatly and were highly dependent on my teacher. At times, I hated math and felt I couldn’t be successful, these feelings were correlated with practices like math minutes or the stress that I just *couldn’t get* fractions. Math was fun and I was successful when my teachers were well organized, had multiple means of expressing an idea, and provided multiple opportunities for me to be successful. The effect that my teachers had on my mathematical disposition has been a driving force in my ambition to become a teacher. I want to teach math in such a way that my students move forward with the mathematical confidence that I so often lacked throughout my education. I don’t see the value in measuring how well a student can do a calculator’s job, I want to see that students have a problem-solving mentality that allows them to solve any problem, whether it looks familiar or not. Math minutes and other high risk math assessments emphasize speed and accuracy rather that ensuring that the student understands the underlying concepts. I have never seen the connection between speed and math and I hope that my students never feel that their thinking time is rushed. While speed can make things easier, if you can’t do something right then you definitely can’t do it quickly. Speed comes from good practice over time and I am still practicing and getting faster. Students need to know that we are all life-long learners in our content area and we can always continue to grow and be a little quicker.

The freedom and lack of standardized testing at alternative private school’s appeal to me but I know that the students those schools serve are usually not the ones who are in dire need of great teachers and role models. In the words of Plato, “The quality of the State depends on the kind of education that the members (groups) of the state receive.” Public schools are our best hope for a bright future and a world we can be proud to leave behind. If we don’t put everything we have into educating our youth the quality of our state will surely suffer. Public schools affect such a huge proportion of our nation and I hope I can help to better even a small corner of that population. My research regarding poverty in schools has emphasized the fact that students in poverty are underserved in our schools and need educators who understand class differences and can reach the students who are often ostracized by traditional education. My classroom will support both oral and print culture, incorporate group and kinesthetic activities, and uncover content that students can directly relate to their lives so that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds are poised for success. Rather than forsake public schools for experiential and integrated private schools I hope to bring the qualities that I like about those schools into my public-school classroom to make that style of learning more accessible to the general population.

The biggest issue facing education today is the lack of monetary and moral support from federal, state, and local government, and sometimes from the taxpayers themselves. The individual may cite education as a priority but our nations spending tells another story. We can’t expect higher achievement as class sizes continue to grow, teachers are ill equipped to handle the stressors of classroom life, and the teacher turnover rate costs schools ‘upwards of $2.2 billion a year’. (Phillips, 2015) All of these factors are working against student achievement and instead of working toward an actual solution we simply wait for things to get better. We need to work on supporting our teachers so that they can support our students. Teaching is no longer seen as the noble profession it once was and we need to turn that around if we expect to have any teachers in the future. I was never encouraged to be a teacher, my teachers themselves talked about what a ‘bad’ job it was. As much as I know most of those teachers loved what they did, they knew that almost any other professional gets more appreciation, recognition, and appropriate pay than teachers do. I know that teaching will be a hard job no matter what but if we work support them and respect the feedback they give, students will be more successful and teachers will be less likely to change schools so frequently or leave the profession altogether. Fixing our educational system is certainly a daunting task but there are other countries we can look to for inspiration. There are countries that seem to have education *figured out* and they are not doing what we’ve been doing. Just like students sometimes learn best from each other, looking at what has garnered success elsewhere can help us understand the changes we need to make at home.

As much as these big picture issues can weigh on my mind I know that I can make a difference one class at a time. As a humanist I believe strongly that learning should start with the student and then expand outward, into the world. Self-actualization is one of the main goal of a humanist education and I hope to help each student accomplish this on an individual basis. Through this process, students and teachers develop a strong relationship where thoughts, feelings, and opinions are highly valued. One common criticism of humanism is that it is not efficient enough at educating the large class sizes that exist in most U.S. schools today. While I agree that a strictly humanistic approach to education may not be the most effective way to reach a high volume of students, there is unquestionably value in knowing yourself as a learner first. It’s so important that we treat our students as the individuals that they are and continue to learn how we can adapt our teaching strategies to the learners in our classroom. This aspect of humanism is central to my philosophy as a math teacher. As a constructivist, I believe in problem based learning where students examine problems relevant to their lives and explore possible solutions. Constructivists accept many points of views but require that these beliefs be supported by clear reasoning. I want a classroom is respectful, comfortable, and safe space with students who value differing opinions and perspectives. These are skills that we need to teach our students, not just expect them to have. Active questioning and lively debate and discussion will also prominent. The sharing of ideas and discovery of information is the most important part of a constructivist class. The depth and breadth of the knowledge acquired in a class based on exploration would be impossible to cover through direct instruction. I want my students to be excited about our discoveries and take ownership of their learning. These constructivist qualities of exploration and questioning are at the core of my educational philosophy.

Humanism and constructivism employ intrinsic motivation, by giving students choice and asking them to focus on things that interest them they will be generating their own drive. Incorporating high SAMR technology into classroom activities and learning is another means of motivating students. Giving students expansive tools like Google Sketch Up, Geogebra, and Fathom can help facilitate their imaginations and bring big ideas to life. So often when we give students great technology and a place to go they blow us away with the complexity and depth of the learning they create. Technology’s role in our lives and the classroom is only growing and it’s important that we know how to use it in a meaningful way. There will be times when technology bolsters learning and times when it is unnecessary. I hope I can balance the use of technology in my classroom and be sure that when I incorporate technology it is effective and furthers the learning. My most fundamental beliefs about teaching math center around the discovery of math and seeing the math in our everyday world and how it impacts us. If I’m doing these things well my students will be motivated and if I find my students are not motivated I know I need to revisit how successfully I have applied the content to the real world and to what extent I have allowed students to explore. While I think exploration and self-directed learning are useful in all content areas, they seem to be especially well suited to math. What I love about math is that with any one assignment or experiment there is so much math to be had, and tangential lessons often arise out of seemingly unrelated topics. When you allow students to explore in math there is no telling where they will take it and what they will discover.

I want my students to leave my classroom knowing themselves as a learner and a person a little better. As we get to know who our students are and how they best learn we should let our students in on these insights. If we can help our students know their learning styles and proclivities they can advocate for themselves and their needs later on in their education. As important as this strong sense of individuality is, we also need students who are team players. By using a variety of cooperative learning groups and activities students will learn how to work with others and understand cultural, socioeconomic, and gender differences among their classmates. The emphasis on cooperation and teamwork will promote empathy in students and enable them to connect with peers from a wide range of backgrounds.

The physical setup of my classroom will be small groups of two or four to accommodate group work and collaborative thinking. I hope that my classroom will feel like a safe and relaxing place for all of my students. Environment plays a large role in learning so there needs to be differentiation in organization as well. I want students to have some option as to the type of seating they want and the types of interactions they want to have with peers. While it’s important that all students work both together and alone, they should have some choice as to when they do it. I have been inspired by peers already in the field who are writing grants for alternative seating. Comfortable chairs, stools, stability balls, and fidget seats can help students focus and stay relaxed even when their changing bodies are causing them discomfort. Teachers and schools have limited resources but if we take advantages of opportunities we can get great tools like these to help our students learn.

In addition to diverse seating I want my classroom to have hand held fidgets for all students to access, natural lighting, and plant life. Sterile school environments with bright lights and uncomfortable chairs can be a huge learning distraction and ironically, giving these alternatives reduces classroom management cases. As a naturalist I hope to bring nature inside as well as bringing my students into the outdoors. Oxygen producing plants and sunlight can do wonders for our energy and mood. Motivated by my desire to teach the whole student I want all my students to know how to get the most out of their brain, through hydration and physical activity. Self-care techniques like (laughing) yoga, deep breathing, and mindfulness will play a large role in my classroom ritual, students will learn the positive impact that these practices can have on the mind and body and take that knowledge with them beyond the classroom. It’s so important that we teach students how to manage stress, take care of themselves, and recognize where they are and what they need for support. As much stimulation as students receive today through technology and social media It’s important that we show them how to unplug and stay in touch with themselves. Too often students are expected to manage stress and emotions without anyone to show them how. I hope that I can impart mindfulness and thoughtfulness on my students through these classroom routines.

The practices discussed in this paper will lead to a classroom environment that is safe, accepting, and knowledge positive. I hope to create a classroom that makes students want to learn and work hard. While I aim to be relaxed and have a relaxed classroom I want rigorous academics to occur there. It is important to me that students are working hard and learning a lot with minimal, but appropriate, guidance and support from myself and other staff. I hope that I can facilitate self-directed learning and thinking that goes beyond the classroom and the school. One thing that I want to be crystal clear in my classroom is that knowledge is power and that academic success is valued. I hate the idea that there are classrooms where students feel like doing well and enjoying learning is uncool and that students shouldn’t try to do those things. Learning should be fun and engaging with clear meaning and we should all want to do more of it. By maintaining this attitude and proving it with exciting lessons and products I hope to instill this belief in my students. I know that my educational philosophy is only beginning and it will continue to grow and change as I come into my role as an educator, but I hope my positivity and ambition to enable success persist.